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Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore

Centenary 1861-1961

Drawings and Paintings of

Rabindranath Tagore

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Lalit Kala Akademi

Acknowledgements

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THE bursting of all bonds into the freedom of a luminous, ideal vitality was a powerfully felt theme in the early poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. A nonconformist all his life, the poet never repudiated nor ignored the given ambient of his artistic non-age. He progressively transmuted, through unrelenting creativity, all that had pre-existed as limited and local, into expressions increasingly contemporary and universal.

Though predominantly literary in nature, the rich and numerous gifts of this man of genius easily encompassed the cultural life of the nation and the world. Whichever region of human feeling, thought and action he chose, the form and the content of his prolific contributions were remarkably consistent in their development. It was as if the same intuition of a balanced, harmonious, and basically poetic aesthetics had moulded every orientation of his personality. Spiritual values, world order, national education, an intensely lyrical poem, a highly poetic song, even the way he dressed or spoke; all seemed to breathe the same feeling for a tranquil and exalted aesthetic rightfulness.

No wonder it was such a disconcerting surprise when drawings and paintings by the poet were exhibited for the first time in 1930 in Europe, and subsequently in 1931 in India. His work in this unfamiliar medium laid bare strange, non-chalant, linear rhythms and assertive, disquieting, fantastic images. The phenomenon was on the face of it an eruptive rebellion, contradistinguished from all the profound and serene values the poet had carefully tended and developed through continual creative activity extending over half a century.

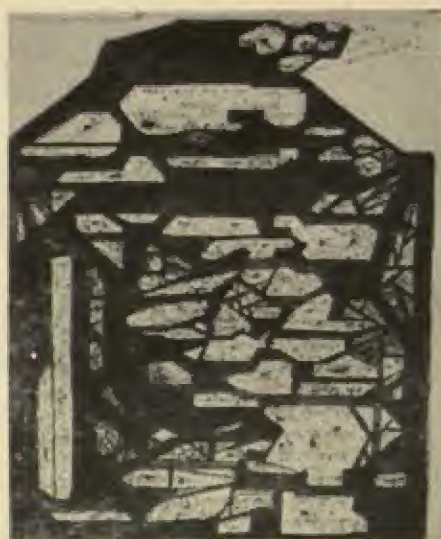
In 1895 Tagore had regretted, rather elaborately, his failure in wooing the muse of painting. The sporadic sketches and drawings surviving from the period reveal an innocent hand. Had he persisted, he might have proceeded to paint on the basis of his given Victorian-colonial background, his Indian and Indo-Persian cultural inheritance, his direct contacts with the West, and his participation in the beginnings of Asian nationalism. He found no time however to go through the rigors of the discipline of drawing and painting. Instead, he occupied himself with creating the modern Bengali language, and establishing his own norms of literary excellence, impelled by his ceaseless urge to transcend one literary form and evolve another.

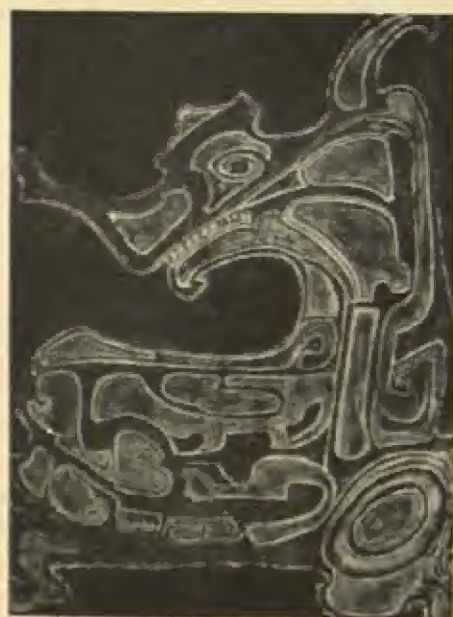
It must also be stated that while Tagore was an inspirer of the Indian nationalist revival in painting and an expounder of Asian cultural coherence, he had early realised the inherent limitations of such rigid categories. He envisaged man as one and world culture was his inalienable heritage.

Nevertheless, Tagore had to resolve in terms of personal experience and development the conflict of an unworried, placid, ascertained, typical world of inherited eternal verities as against the tentative probing of uncertainties, the anxious incompleteness of control over new powers, the questioning of every traditional value, and the unanswered questions of the twentieth century. After uncertain skirmishes and retreats, he seemed to have solved the problem for himself by having finally decided to march forward to the present century.

This major crisis of his life perhaps found a non-deliberate expression in the brooding, excessive, elaborate scribbling that began to occupy the pages of his manuscripts, 1924 onward — sometimes completely obliterating the text. Tangled, complicated meanders; accumulated, rectilinear,

Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore





re-entrant angles supererogated their initial function of deletion, and demanded independent attention as complete and rhythmical configuration.

After a pause during which Tagore had travelled widely abroad, the pretext of manuscript erasure was abandoned. And closed, self contained, resilient shapes — almost devoid of gesture — began to be placed on the voids of the surface with a dynamic suspensive tension. Incisive convolutes developed into elaborately detailed monograms with a tendency towards evocation of undecisive but organic and quintessential forms. A whimsically angular geometric stylization appeared simultaneously. The assured finality of inventive shapes and negative spaces upheld by lucid plastic rhythms contrasted with a curious tentativeness of a highly personal fantasy. These early monochromes of 1928 were generally worked with a fountain pen. Two toned and three toned drawings followed soon after. The pen point was often used laterally, fingers and bits of rag spread the inks, and the brush was the last to be adopted. Tones and limited colours were distinctive of structure, but an original, pure, liquid calligraphy was dominant.

If there were occasional reminiscences of stylized Victorian illustrations, the affinities with the ideals of Art Nouveau were more than superficial. But the insistent, flowing, vegetative rhythms of these drawings were sometimes imbued with an almost animist vitality beyond the ornamental aspects of Art Nouveau.

Habitually, Tagore had built on the given ground. His Europe at the turn of the century, his catalytic presence in the ferment of Indian nationalist painting — dominated by theme and mood, his intuitive grasp of the nature of the struggle for plastic autonomy in modern art: all helped to condition and determine his personal adventures in visual expression. In place of conventional technical training and academic regulations, Tagore could substitute his innate susception of rhythm, his highly developed feeling for measure, his impeccable sense of visual syntax and his disciplined, elegant calligraphy.

Tagore's literary work of the period does not reveal any precisely parallel development, but a certain shift in emphasis had been already revealed in the sequence of his speculative studies on art and aesthetics. From a quasi-traditional, ethical aestheticism, through increasingly subjective interpretations of tradition, the way quickly led to an open assertion of vivid personal experience of reality as the apprehensible universe of the individual. By 1930, Tagore's initial acceptance of ideal beauty as truth had evolved into that of recognition of rhythm as reality emphatic.

The elation of the rejuvenescent experience of the vehemently and reverberatingly rhythmical first drawings might have crystallized the speculation, but the creative independence of Tagore was not delimited by his own theories. And even before significant rhythm could be proclaimed as the final and ultimate value, the linear pliancy of polymorphic shapes in space was sometime in 1929 suddenly and profusely assailed by a distinctly flamboyant polychromy. Forms came to acquire gesture heralding the onslaught of memory.

Rhythmic vitality came to be increasingly overlaid with uninhibited, indiscreet emergence of recollected images. These strangely characterized, rather than beautiful phantasmagoria revealed an astonishingly capricious private world in the very process of taking shape and substance.





The underscoring of the emotive reorganization of forms practised by the early Expressionists seemed to have been the precipitant. The initial tautness of surface receded into a vague depth. Out of this unaccountably materialized a highly textured and dramatically lit procession of readily transformable embodiments. Colours ceased to be moodless and differentiative in a tumultuous gamut of translucent luminescence that was pervasive and formative.

It was only during the comparatively rare moments when the intensity of visualization turned flaccid that the untrained natural draughtsmanship and the curiously original act of painting of a non-painter stood revealed. Not unlike the fixations of the Surrealists, hypnotic acuity of the finally captured image was however overwhelmingly more significant than any painterly preoccupation with the elegant manipulations of the pigment or the building up of a handsome impasto.

Starting from the convenient format of the manuscript, the drawings and paintings soon attained ampler proportions, but they retained the verticality of the written page. Paper continued as preferred support and surface, on which quick-drying overlapping transparent coloured inks and gouache could fix images fast, before they found time for transition. For as long as they stayed projected, the images — though often signs of submerged, indefinable entities — were in themselves definitive. With the somnambulist's ignorance of danger, the impetuous repeated attacks of the pen and the brush somehow nearly always succeeded in preserving intact the originally impressed image, generally by preserving a narrow rim of virgin paper all along the contours as a barrier.

Beginning from 1932, Tagore used opaque colours for rugged texture and sometimes as very sharp highlight. Crayons, experimental corrosive inks, fugitive vegetable colours, varnishes of different kinds were playfully applied on any quality of paper at hand, in disregard of the impermanence of the materials. While the few etchings and dry-points had the same incisiveness as the pen drawings, his only known attempt at painting in oils on canvas was abandoned halfway presumably because of the comparative lack of speed of the medium in drying. The painstaking craftsmanship of his poetry notwithstanding, the paintings of Tagore were no handicraft.

The total oeuvre of more than two thousand drawings and paintings, mostly datable between 1928 and 1940, could hardly provide adequate expression to the resistless onrush of a variegated aggregation of projected imagery: Unfurling, animated ribbons, composite flower-birds, nameless archaic beastliness, ambiguous sardonic imps, contorting primitive reptiles, proliferating monster-vessels, oddly sensuous nudes on extravagant furniture, improbable protagonists in a mysterious melodrama, distraught angular pilgrims on an unknown quest eternal, romantic dream houses, illustrations to lost stories, lovers, silhouetted incandescent evening landscape, murderous enactments, peaceful promenades, familiar types, characters and portraits, masks of sarcasm, masks of terror, sentimental pubescent girls, heads of power and glory, delicate oval moon-faces of silent lips and with eyes to transfix, all freshly formed, rampant, iridescent.

Categorical frontiers dissolved, and the nascent inner world was peopled with self generating entities that belonged as much to the state of awakening as to that of dreaming.





This was, however, not a changeless state. Even the most persistent themes underwent a development in the direction of increasing characterization, and of impartation of a definite personality to each image. The development clearly moved away from the direction of abstraction.

Integral composition tended to be superseded by an increasing importance of subjects. Mannerisms were the conceptual adumbrations of parts of the human face, which had become for Tagore the pre-eminent problem. A bright orange, a brilliant blue or an acid green seemed to prevail, though colour continued to be mainly the unpremeditated arrival at chance combinations.

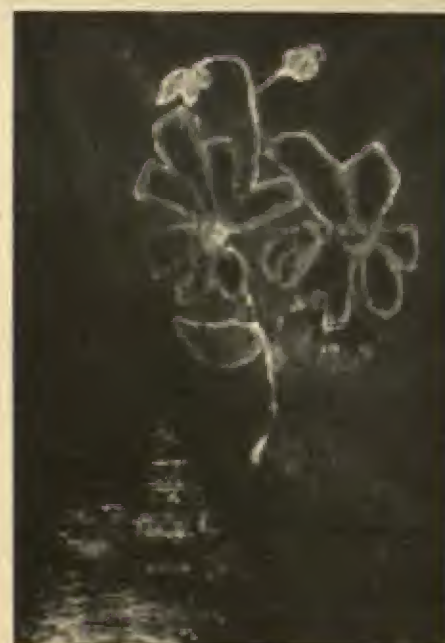
Striking evening landscapes recurred. Boldly treated head studies predominated as characteristic topography of splendid anthropic terrain. The pensive, ovoid face of a woman with large unwavering soulful eyes was perhaps a more obsessive theme than any other. Exhibited first in 1930, endless variations of the same mood-image continued to be emergent throughout. The earlier ones were delicately modelled and opalescent, while the later examples were excessively dramatic with intensely lit forehead, exaggerated nose-ridge, painted in strong colours, bodied forth from a primal gloom. Even the occasional later appearances of the animatist meander were defiant with concentrated vitality and strident of colour. In contrast, later landscapes often tended towards a diffuse, softened glow of humid atmosphere. The last drawings were sped with a tremulous nervous sensibility.

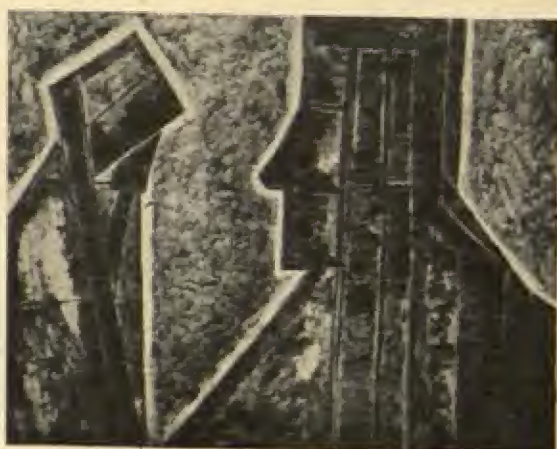
With prodigal abandon, Tagore had explored during the brief phase of 1928-30, his discovery of the world that was: 'not sentiment, nor thought, nor utterance — pure form fashioned of light'. But later, except for increasingly fewer examples to the contrary, non-verbal plastic possibilities were swiftly overcome with an emotive figuration of people and places that came to be progressively determined by literary content, even if without resulting in illustration. In spite of his continuing verbal recognition of the purity of the visual world of forms, literature was ultimately triumphant. The finale, however, was not without poetic justice. As though impelled by his intimations of the revelatory transposition of perceptive faculties in art, the aging poet's runaway experience of painting had powerfully aided in setting comparatively free the conclusive phase of his literature from lingering aristocratic, formal and traditional compunctions and inhibitions of the last century. Rabindranath Tagore had come to belong fully to the world of his time, the modern world.

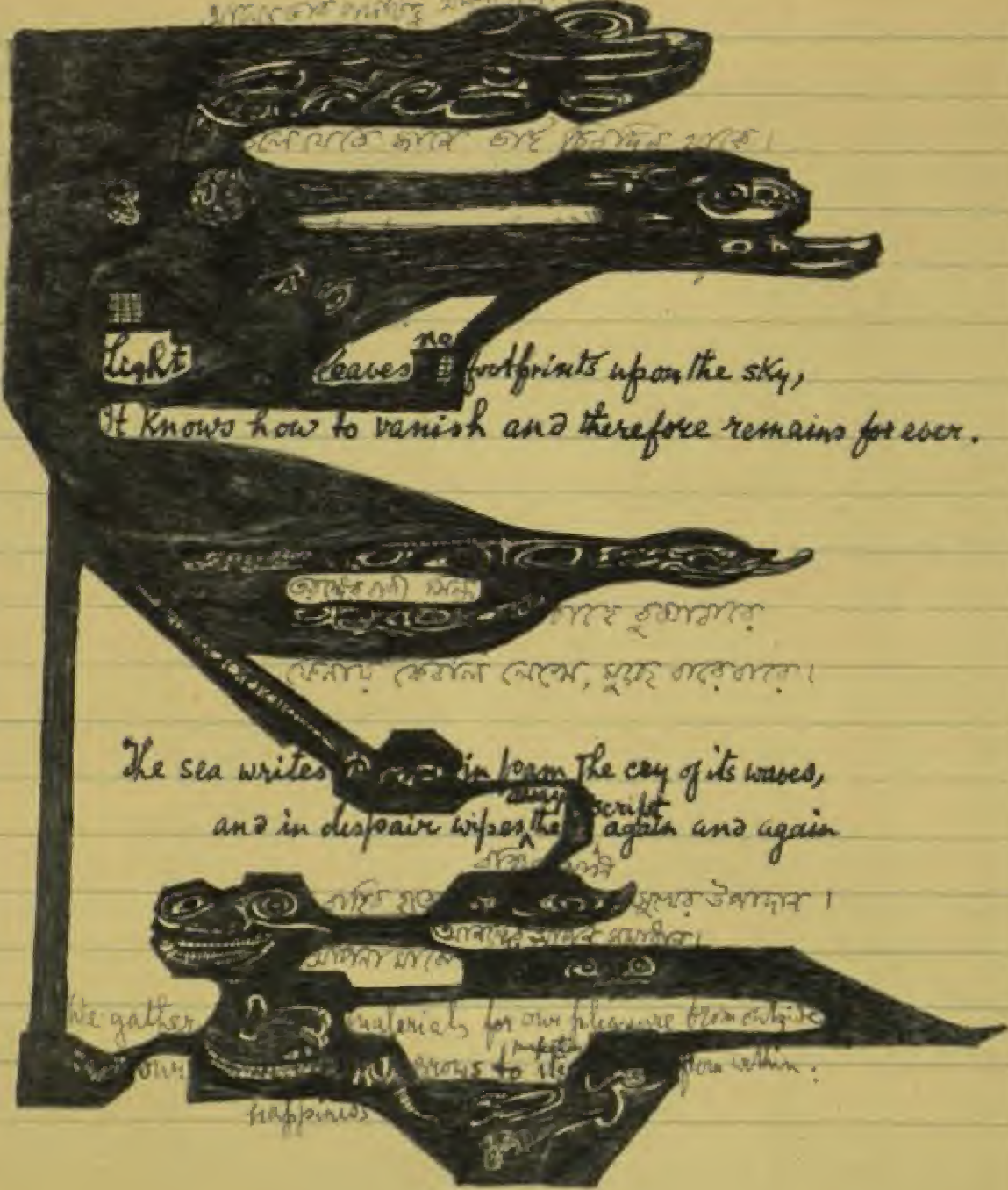
The drawings and paintings of the poet had richly traced the extraordinary inner journey of a complex individual through the ecstatic affirmation of existence, manifest as rhythm-articulate inherent in form self-referent, towards, to the convinced cognition of individuated imagery as dramatic characterization of concepts and associations, being the total fantasy of the emotional world.

A remarkably dual apprehension of the universe of man.

Prithwish Neogy







Light leaves ^{no} footprints upon the sky,
It knows how to vanish and therefore remains for ever.

The sea writes ^{in foam} the cry of its waves,
and in despair wipes the ^{script} again and again.

We gather materials for our pleasure from outside
happiness grows to its ^{perfect} from within.



























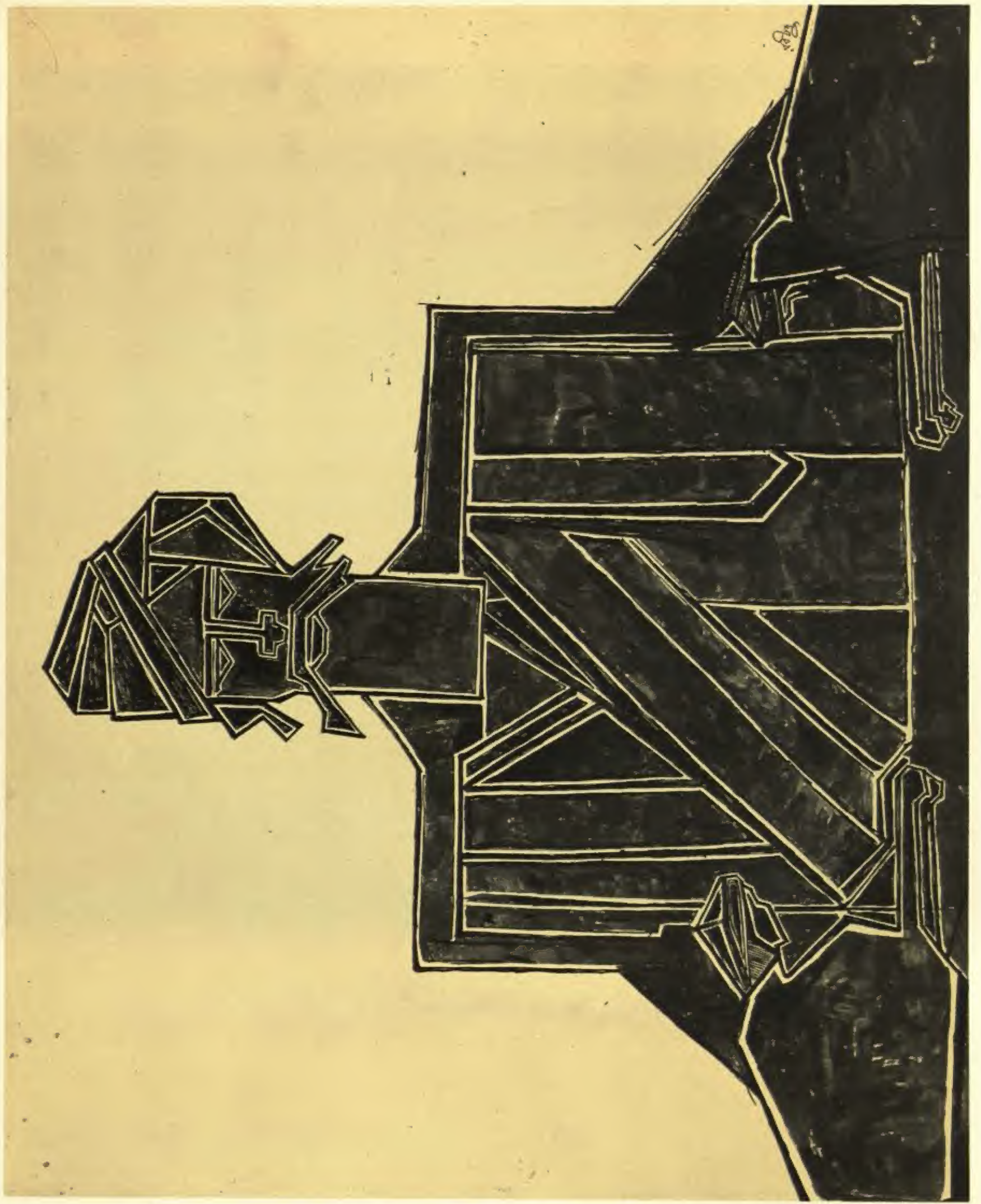




































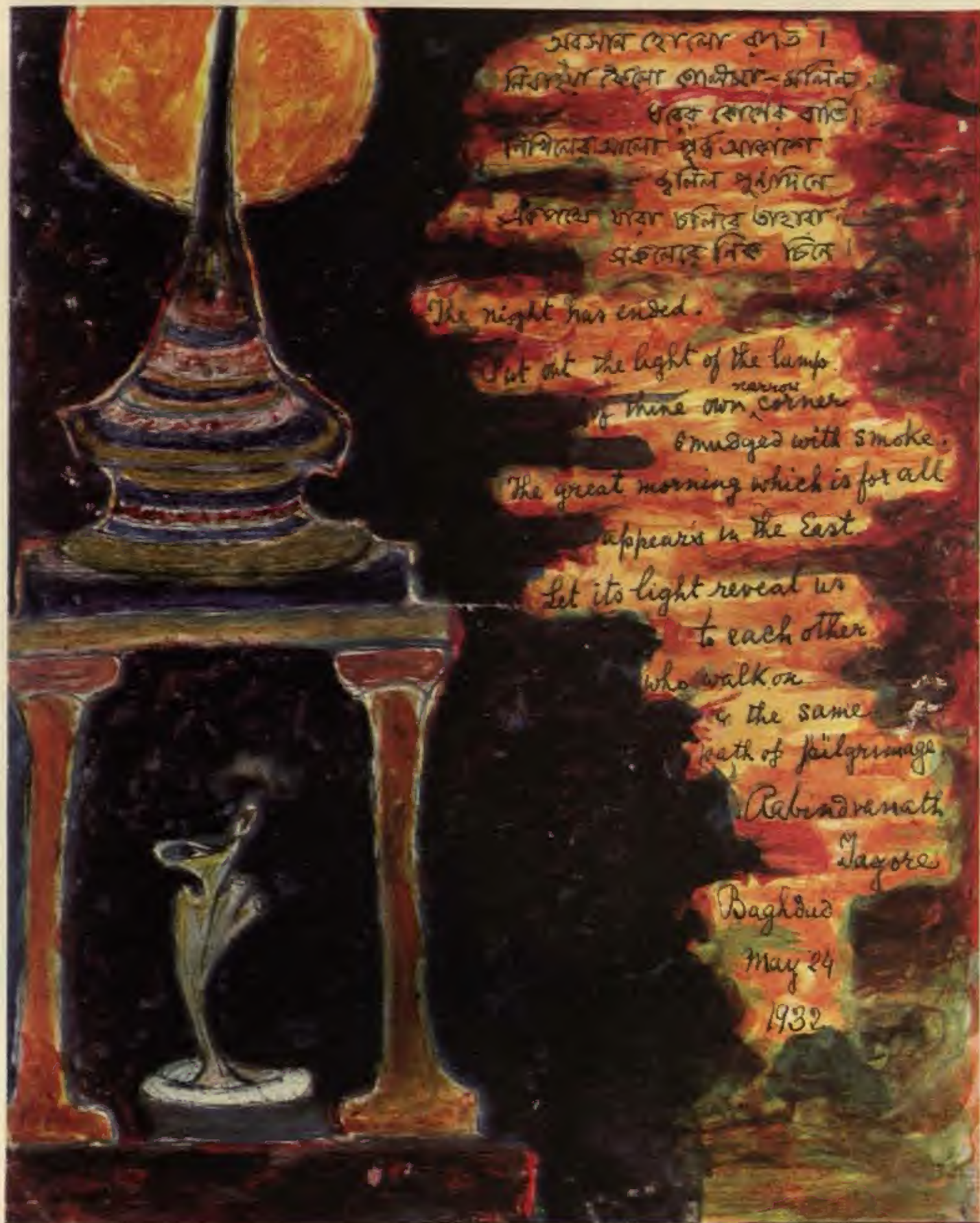












অবসান হৈলো রাত ।
নিবাহিত হৈলো জামিয়ার-অগ্নিক
ধরক কোলক বাড়ি ।
নিমিত্ত আলো মুকুট আলো
কুনিম পূর্ণমণ্ডলে
একপাক্ষে চার চন্দির তাহার
সকলকে নিরু চিত্তে ।

The night has ended.

Put out the light of the lamp
of thine own ^{narrow} corner
Embrued with smoke.
The great morning which is for all
appears in the East.

Let its light reveal us
to each other
who walk on
the same
path of pilgrimage.

Rabindranath

Jayore

Baghdad

May 24

1932









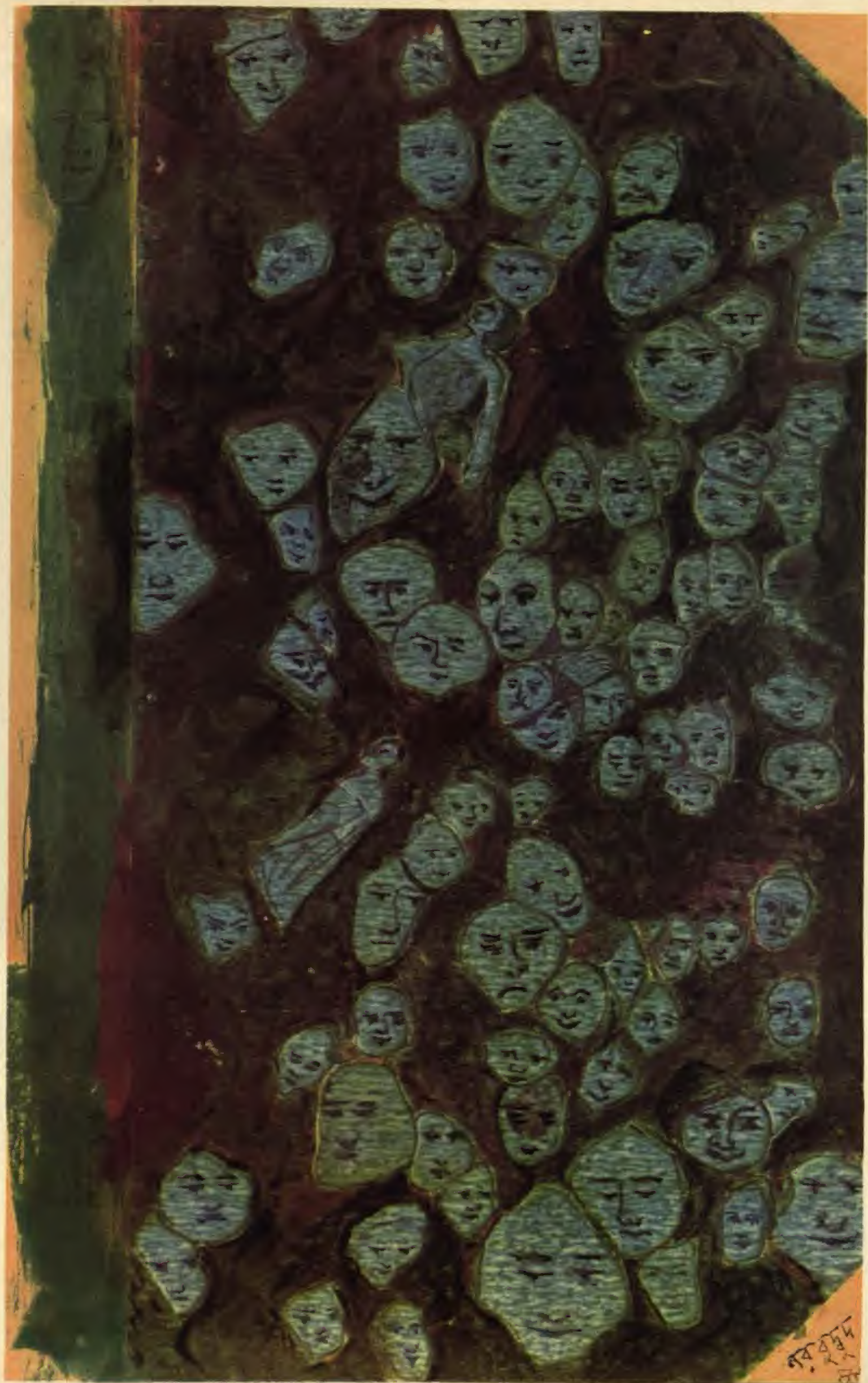




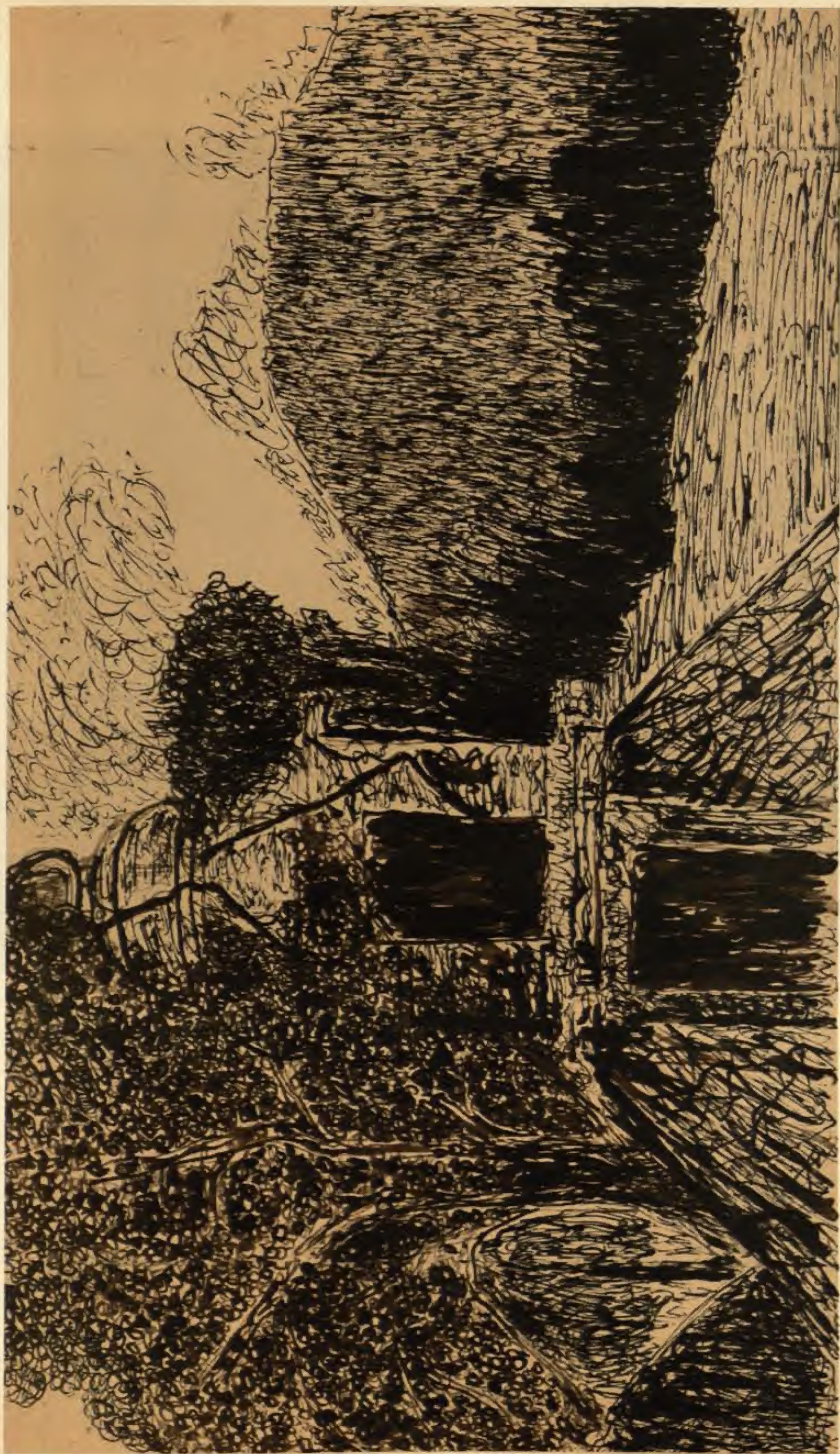




















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Dimension of Plates

PLATE No.	DIMENSION	PLATE No.	DIMENSION
1	20.1 cm. \times 16.2 cm.	21	29.9 cm. \times 23.7 cm.
2	27.0 cm. \times 22.0 cm.	22	28.0 cm. \times 20.1 cm.
3	26.7 cm. \times 21.9 cm.	23	24.6 cm. \times 19.8 cm.
4	34.0 cm. \times 20.5 cm.	24	26.5 cm. \times 19.8 cm.
5	24.8 cm. \times 19.5 cm.	25	21.5 cm. \times 16.3 cm.
6	27.0 cm. \times 21.0 cm.	26	26.3 cm. \times 20.0 cm.
7	24.2 cm. \times 19.0 cm.	27	36.3 cm. \times 19.3 cm.
8	24.9 cm. \times 20.1 cm.	28	35.3 cm. \times 23.9 cm.
9	27.1 cm. \times 20.6 cm.	29	32.1 cm. \times 20.0 cm.
10	34.0 cm. \times 20.5 cm.	30	29.2 cm. \times 20.2 cm.
11	56.7 cm. \times 43.9 cm.	31	54.6 cm. \times 31.7 cm.
12	54.6 cm. \times 43.9 cm.	32	32.4 cm. \times 20.5 cm.
13	56.4 cm. \times 42.0 cm.	33	22.2 cm. \times 15.5 cm.
14	36.3 cm. \times 27.7 cm.	34	34.2 cm. \times 23.9 cm.
15	63.2 cm. \times 46.5 cm.	35	36.4 cm. \times 25.0 cm.
16	33.6 cm. \times 21.2 cm.	36	33.9 cm. \times 22.5 cm.
17	26.8 cm. \times 19.9 cm.	37	35.8 cm. \times 24.9 cm.
18	26.8 cm. \times 20.0 cm.	38	33.8 cm. \times 23.9 cm.
19	30.6 cm. \times 22.0 cm.	39	33.9 cm. \times 23.7 cm.
20	66.2 cm. \times 40.9 cm.	40	65.3 cm. \times 45.3 cm.

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